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A Conversation With Sissela Bok

"Buildup of Secrecy Carries Great Dangers for Democracy"

TIMOTHY A. MURPHY—USN&WR

Sissela Bok is a Swedish-born philosopher who teaches at Harvard University and has written extensively on ethical issues of broad concern. Her latest book is *Secrets: On the Ethics of Concealment and Revelation.* She is also the author of *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life.*

Without secrets, no "sense of identity"

Secrecy is an indispensable part of life. Even if society wanted to, there is no way in which it could do away with everything that human beings conceal. If society were to try to compel people to expose all personal secrets, that would lead to the kind of loss of liberty that we think of in connection with a novel like *1984.* With no capacity for keeping secrets and for choosing when to reveal them, human beings would lose their sense of identity and every shred of autonomy.

Yet, in writing my book about secrecy, I found that in the United States many people believe that they should make as much as possible about their personal lives known to others—and they feel guilty about what they don't reveal. That may be part of America's Puritan heritage, which leads people to feel guilty about what is perfectly natural.

"Important to protect the privacy of individuals"

One cannot say that secrecy is either wrong or always right. In and of itself it is neutral. In many cases secrecy turns out to be positive, and in other cases it is harmful.

Where individuals are concerned, the presumption ought to be in favor of their opportunity to keep secrets as they wish except in special circumstances, such as in the case of criminals. If we did not respect individual secrecy, we could not have a democratic society.

In organizations, as well, it's very important to protect the privacy of individuals. But when it comes to the institution itself, I think that the presumption should be toward openness, not secrecy.

Now, a certain amount of secrecy is required for any organization to function. Governments require some secrecy from enemies and, therefore, from the citizens themselves. But that has to be kept to a minimum because secrecy in any government tends to expand and grow. There are so many things governments want to hide—not just what is legitimately theirs to conceal but also mistakes they have made and plans they may have for abuse and unwise military undertakings.

"Many dangers" in requiring polygraph tests

In a democracy, a number of institutions, the press among them, serve as a check on the tendency of government to keep secrets. And insiders within government may, if they become aware of a serious problem, blow the whistle on it. But the more acts and executive orders that the government can make use of for expanded secrecy, the more difficult it becomes to hold members of the government accountable.

In this context, President Reagan's recent executive order tightening procedures for handling classified information is a very big step. The order requires federal employes with access to classified information to agree to take polygraph tests if asked to do so when the government investigates the source of leaks. This step ought to have been carefully debated by the public before it was put into effect.

As the order stands, there are many dangers. Polygraph testing is both unreliable and intrusive. People not involved in leaking government information may be so worried or nervous about something else in their lives that the test indicates that they are lying when that is not the case. Many people might feel their privacy invaded because polygraph testers often ask questions that have very little to do with a person's job.

"Highest officials engage in leaking"

Far too much government information is already classified—studies have shown that. I question the current efforts to intensify government secrecy when so much of

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what is secret is problematic. It would be very different if we could be sure that the government keeps only those secrets that are indispensable.

From a purely practical standpoint, I don't think such executive orders are going to control leaking. Some of the highest officials engage in leaking, and that, of course, affects the view that their subordinates have of the practice.

And the more secrecy a government exercises, the more pressure there is for leaking—and the pressure comes from both the outside and the inside. On the outside stand reporters and others who want to find out what is being held secret. On the inside, there are people who think that illegitimate secrets are being kept—and they want that information known.

The solution to this problem lies in cutting back on the unnecessary secrecy with which government has become encrusted. Only then can the normal channels of reporting and public inquiry displace leaking.

"We have been a beacon of open government"

President Reagan's executive order is part of a broad trend to reverse the movement of the last two decades toward greater public access to government information. To some extent, the tightening up is understandable. New technologies such as satellites make it possible for countries to know one another's troop movements, military installations and the like. That has made a number of nations feel more insecure and reach for greater control over secrecy.

The U.S. government has moved to limit the scope of the Freedom of Information Act, to give officials more power to classify documents as secret and to expand official review over publications by government employes and scientists. But too often the government has acted without demonstrating a clear need for the buildup of secrecy and control and without submitting its plans to public debate.

Yet, because such a buildup of secrecy carries great dangers for any democracy, debate is indispensable. Instead of moving toward ever greater secrecy, I believe that this nation should honor its traditions of open government. We have been for the world a beacon of open government, and we have to be very careful not to squander that leadership.

In the scientific community, there is a lot of resistance to government moves to tighten up on secrecy—and there are some potentially serious consequences ahead. Scientists are saying that they would prefer not to go into a field that is threatened with censorship. Universities might stay away from research that could become classified. It could be very detrimental to national security if scientists and universities steer away from whole areas of research.

"Press should not be exempt from scrutiny"

The whole issue of the press and secrecy is very interesting. Even as the press makes possible the disclosure of many of the secrets of government and other groups, it is concerned about its own privileges and secrecy. The press challenges every collective rationale for secrecy save its own.

But its practices of secrecy, selective disclosure and probing should not be exempt from scrutiny. Without that scrutiny, the press's routine invocation of the public's right to know will combine with fierce competition in news reporting to deflect questions about what reporters and editors ought to do in pursuit of their professional goals.

Until the press is as open in its own practices as it expects other institutions to be in their practices, its stance will be inconsistent and will lend credence to charges of press unfairness.

"Public will bear the burden" of concealment

Secrecy is also at issue in the legal profession. The new stance by the American Bar Association that lawyers should keep secret the planned crimes of their clients is something that the public should debate very seriously. I believe that the public will bear the burden of the criminality that is thus concealed.

If we are worried about the victims of crime, as we should be, we also ought to be very worried about people who help conceal planned crimes and who, therefore, bring into the world many more victims. Even in the case of white-collar crime, there are victims. There may not be people lying bleeding in the streets, but there are victims of toxic-waste disposal and fraudulent bank manipulations. And the financial cost to the nation of white-collar crime, such as tax cheating, computer fraud, labor racketeering and bribery, is staggering.

The premises supporting confidentiality are strong, but they cannot support practices of secrecy—whether by individual clients, institutions or professionals themselves—that undermine and contradict the very respect for persons and for human bonds that confidentiality was meant to protect.

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"You needn't tell me what they are, Norris, but have you any secrets you plan to carry with you to the grave?"

Conducted by ALVIN P. SANOFF